

Boucher Addresses Commonwealth Transportation Board Regarding Coalfields Expressway (July 19, 2006)

The Coalfields Expressway and the Economy of Southwest Virginia

U.S. Representative Rick Boucher

Commonwealth Transportation Board Public Meeting

Abingdon, Virginia

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Secretary Homer and Members of the Commonwealth Transportation Board, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today about The Coalfields Expressway - a project of the enormous significance to the western counties of the Ninth Congressional District and the region that adjoins them.

I would have preferred to join you in person today, but the Congressional schedule prevents my direct participation in your meeting. I am offering these thoughts instead from my office building in Washington.

Let me begin by saying that after decades of collaborative efforts by local, state and federal officials to create a robust and diversified economy for our region, the coal producing counties of Southwest Virginia today stand poised at the threshold of an economic renaissance.

Longstanding efforts to attract technology jobs begun in the early 1990's have led to the creation of a dynamic customer service and technical support industry in Virginia's western counties, with thousands of citizens currently employed at centers located in Scott, Lee, Wise, Dickenson, Buchanan and Russell Counties and the City of Norton. Moreover, our region is beginning to reap the benefit of the next level of technology employment with the recent announcements by CGI-AMS and Northrup Grumman of the location of large centers in the Town of Lebanon in Russell County employing a total of 735 highly skilled, highly paid workers providing a broad range of information technology services. The success of these efforts will pave the way for other major IT companies to locate high paying jobs in rural areas such as ours that combine a low cost of doing business with an outstanding workforce and an excellent quality of life.

Rapidly increasing global energy needs have in recent years created a resurgence in the coal industry, and our region has benefitted through increased mining activity and employment opportunities in that sector. Another initiative that will assure continued growth in the coal industry arises from the successful effort to attract a coal fired power generating facility to our region. This spring a consortium of companies led by Dominion Resources announced selection of a site in Wise County for construction of a 500 megawatt clean coal burning power plant that will use coal mined in Virginia to generate electricity. The new plant will provide a capital investment for our region in the amount of approximately \$1 billion, will create hundreds of jobs both during and after construction and will assure a future for Virginia's coal industry for decades to come. The permitting process for this plant will begin this summer, and construction is scheduled for completion in 2012.

These successes are not the result of happenstance. Rather, they are the direct result of the wise investment over a period of decades of 100's of millions of state and federal dollars - public monies - in industrial parks, roads, water and wastewater systems, high speed telecommunications networks, airports, workforce education and training programs and other infrastructure vital to economic development.

I am asking today that you continue the tradition of wisely investing public funds in projects that further the cause of economic prosperity for the citizens of Virginia. I am asking that you invest in the Coalfields Expressway, a project that will enable and ensure the success not only of the efforts I have mentioned above, but also of many other key initiatives that are currently planned or underway that are driving the need for this highway. I would like to take the time to describe just a few of them.

* In the last decade, two graduate level schools, the Appalachian School of Law and the University of Appalachia School of Pharmacy, have opened in Grundy. These schools maintain an enrollment of more than 500 students with more than 70 faculty and staff. Students are moving to the Grundy area from around Virginia and the nation in order to obtain these professional degrees.

* The University of Virginia at Wise has recently instituted new technology based degree granting programs, including a degree in software engineering, designed to train an emerging technology laborforce for the new jobs being created in the region. There is a great need for rapid and efficient transportation access to connect students in Wise, Dickenson and Buchanan Counties and the greater area with these educational and employment opportunities, a need that will be served by the Coalfields Expressway.

* The redevelopment of the Town of Grundy is well underway. Old flood-prone structures are being torn down, and a new town is being constructed on higher, flood-safe ground across the Levisa River from U. S. Route 460, which is being rebuilt as a four-lane road atop a flood-retaining wall. New businesses are already emerging to serve the growing student and faculty population. The Town's newly constructed commercial center proximate to the Coalfields Expressway will assure that Grundy once again takes its place as an economic engine for the entire region..

* The State of Kentucky is in the process of building U. S. Route 460 to the Virginia State Line near the entrance to the Breaks Interstate Park. Each fall, hundreds of white-water enthusiasts enjoy rafting, canoeing and kayaking through the gorge. Visitorship at the Park increases yearly. Without better access to the Park from Virginia, tourism-based businesses in Dickenson County will be at a distinct disadvantage compared to those businesses in the Elkhorn City, Kentucky area, where easy access to the Park is being provided.

* The Buchanan County Industrial Development Authority is developing an approximately 1500 acre business park through a public/private partnership with a coal company. The first phase is well underway. The IDA anticipates that the Park will be completed within the next 5 years. In addition to business and industry sites in the Park, the IDA also plans for market-rate housing and retail space. The Coalfields Expressway will be the link that will ensure success of the development.

* In addition to the business park being developed by Buchanan County, the Town of Grundy with its partners Buchanan

and Dickenson Counties is in the process of planning a new regional airport. Although site selection has not been completed, it is planned that the site for the airport will be proximate to the proposed alignment of the Coalfields Expressway. The general aviation airport will provide access to corporate jets and air cargo and will serve as an economic development asset to assist in the attraction of new industry. This state-of-the-art airport will require complementary ground transportation.

Isolation is an enemy to each of these efforts, making it difficult for any of them to attain the degree of success that they merit. Clearly the current highway infrastructure serving the region is inadequate to the task. While several major interstate arteries traverse areas geographically near the region, none actually enter the area. For example, Dickenson County does not have a single segment of four lane roadway, which makes travel to and from the County immensely challenging. The lack of a four lane highway is a major barrier which adversely affects the region's economy. Construction of the Coalfields Expressway will eliminate the barrier. These and other factors persuaded the Congress to designate the Coalfields Expressway as a federal High Priority Corridor in the Federal Highway System.

When constructed, the Coalfields Expressway will intersect with both Route 460 in Buchanan County and with Interstate 23 in Wise County. Both 460 and 23 have undergone recent upgrades and provide ready access to major arteries along the Interstate Highway System, specifically, Interstates 81 and 77. These interstates are among the largest arteries of commerce on the east coast. Providing access to them will link Virginia's coal producing region to the nation's economy and effectively address the inadequacies of transportation infrastructure that exists currently.

The cost of construction of the Coalfields Expressway is a matter of interest and concern. West Virginia has already undertaken construction of the road along an alignment from the Virginia state line to Beckley in a fashion that provides an excellent model for how cost effective construction can occur in Virginia. As the region is rich in coal reserves, West Virginia has partnered with private coal companies. Through this approach, the coal is mined from the ground, which instead of being restored to its original contour upon completion of coal extraction, is prepared as a road bed for the Expressway. Utilizing mine operations to prepare the road bed resulted in a tremendous cost savings in West Virginia, and the opportunity to develop the same innovative partnerships exists in Virginia. Virginia also has abundant coal reserves along the route, and the coal companies which own the rights to the reserves have expressed a strong interest in partnering with the State to begin construction of the Coalfields Expressway as part of their mining operations. In fact, negotiations between the coal companies and the State to reach a formal agreement under which they could proceed in such a fashion are well underway.

Construction of the Coalfields Expressway using this new approach will assure that we as a region are able to derive the maximum benefit from the promising growth which I have previously described and the many new projects on the verge of development, each conceived and planned in the full belief that Virginia will honor the commitment expressed by three successive Administrations in Richmond to build this essential highway. On behalf of the citizens of Southwest Virginia, I ask for your help in honoring these longstanding commitments.